

The Modern Castrato: Gaetano Guadagni and the Coming of a New Operatic Age.
Patricia Howard.

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The Modern Castrato is a scrupulously researched documentary biography of Gaetano Guadagni, one of the great operatic stars of the later eighteenth century and one intimately involved — as Howard persuasively demonstrates — with contemporary currents of musical and dramatic reform. Howard draws on a diverse array of primary-source evidence to construct the first complete account of Guadagni's wide-ranging career, tracing his trajectory, season by season, from the cathedral of Sant'Antonio in Padua (the Santo) to the leading operatic stages of Northern Italy, London, and Vienna. Along the way she presents a number of impressive archival finds, including Guadagni's baptismal record (clearing up long-standing confusion about the singer's place and date of birth) and his will and inventory of possessions (containing information about his comfortable standard of living and, fascinatingly, his fondness for marionette theater).

The rich portrait of Guadagni's professional life that emerges in *The Modern Castrato* is noteworthy for both its ordinary and its extraordinary qualities. On the one hand, as Howard describes, Guadagni's path might be taken as "typical of many itinerant singers of the period" (15). His example thus provides general insight into the pragmatics of a career on the eighteenth-century stage, as well as the inner workings and cosmopolitan nature of the European opera business, more broadly. On the other hand, one cannot help but be struck by Guadagni's privileged position at the epicenter of the most important compositional and aesthetic developments of his age. Guadagni enjoyed a close collaboration with Handel (performing in eleven of his oratorios) and acted as a muse for Gluck (originating and popularizing the title role in his landmark *Orfeo ed Euridice*) — to say nothing of his involvement with a host of lesser-known but comparably progressive composers of the era, Traetta, Jommelli, and Bertoni foremost among them.

The crux of Howard's argument is that Guadagni was not merely a passive observer of the innovations of these important artists, but rather a critical agent in their theatrical

reforms, “devising his own independent contributions to the development of singing and acting, and attempting to forge a new relationship between a singer and his audience” (1) over the course of his long and varied career. And, indeed, the most intriguing portions of Howard’s book are the brief excursions from the chronological overview of Guadagni’s life — a series of interpolated chapters assessing the specific ways that the singer participated in the modernization of opera during this pivotal period in the genre’s development. In “Guadagni the Actor,” for example, Howard discusses Guadagni’s association with David Garrick and the comedians Filippo Laschi and Pietro Pertici, exploring how the singer might have translated their noted advances in acting technique into the musical realm. Guadagni’s interest in facial expression, his total absorption into character, and his emphasis on acting through the once-static aria — these, Howard suggests, were forward-looking ideas that influenced the wider path of reform. In “Guadagni the Singer,” along similar lines, the author analyzes the body of music composed for the castrato, positing that his special vocal talents (including his passionate lyricism, clear diction, and delicate sense of phrasing) made him the ideal spokesperson for the new operatic age.

The Modern Castrato is well produced, with practical appendixes containing lists of Guadagni’s dramatic roles, records of his employment at the Santo, and a number of archival documents. Complete transcriptions of the singer’s compositions — perhaps the best surviving record of his performance style — are helpfully featured on a companion website. Howard’s monograph stands as an important reference work and will be of particular interest to scholars of performance practice, the economies of theatrical production, and the reform of opera during the long eighteenth century.

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